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SUNDAY READING.

THE

CONVERSION

OF

St. PAUL the APOSTLE.

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CONVERSION of St. PAUL, &c.

PAUL was one of the chief Apoſtles. The greater part of the Epiſtles of the New Teſtament were written by him, and it is therefore well worth the while of every Chriſtian, to beſtow ſome pains in conſidering both his character and his wonderful hiſtory.

In order properly to introduce the preſent ſubject of Paul's Converſion, it is neceſſary firſt to ſay ſomething of the ancient Prophecies concerning Chriſt, by which means we ſhall ſhew the good reaſon which Paul had for believing in him at the time when he appeared.

The Old Teſtament Prophecies of our Savior are many, for his appearance on earth was an event of vaſt importance, and it is no wonder, therefore, that early notice of it was given in the ſacred writings. In the beginning of the world, when our firſt parents had ſinned, the ſentence of death immediately paſſed upon them; but no ſooner was this curſe pronounced, than the merciful promiſe was alſo given, that "*the ſeed of the woman ſhould bruiſe the ſerpent's head;*" a promiſe which related to Chriſt, though as yet dark and myſterious, and which was intended to excite, even from the firſt, man's humble faith and truſt. As the age of the world advanced, the promiſe grew brighter and brighter. It was ſaid to Abraham, "*In thy ſeed ſhall all the nations of the earth be bleſſed;* and ſoon afterwards it was added, "*In* ISAAC *ſhall thy ſeed be bleſſed.*" From time to time the promiſe was renewed, "*there was to be a root*

of Jeſſe that was to reign over the Gentiles, and in him ſhould the Gentiles truſt;" and again, it was ſtill more diſtinctly ſaid, " *Behold a Virgin ſhall conceive, and ſhall bear a ſon, and ſhall call his name Emanuel,*" (or God with us.) And again, " *For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and his name ſhall be called Wonderful Counſellor, the Mighty God, the everlaſting Father, the Prince of Peace.* In the 53d of Iſaiah, all the particulars of his coming are mentioned; " *He was to be deſpiſed and rejected of men; he was to bear our griefs, and carry our infirmities; he was to be brought as a lamb to the ſlaughter, and as a ſheep before the ſhearers is dumb, ſo he was not to open his mouth; and he was alſo to make his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.*" And now the long expected Savior, " *the deſire of all nations,*" appears. Prophecy is fulfilled, for his birth and parentage agree with the declarations made concerning him by the Prophets. Miracles alſo are performed by him, and in the very manner which had been foretold—" *the blind receive their ſight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleanſed, the deaf hear, the dead are raiſed up, and the poor have the goſpel preached unto them.*" Every divine virtue appears alſo in his character, and divine truth drops from his lips. He now calls together his Apoſtles, to whom ſeventy Diſciples are added. An infant Church is formed, the ſeed of that great Chriſtian Church which was to follow. The proofs that Jeſus Chriſt was ſent down from God are encreaſed, and every day affords ſome freſh evidence in favor of Chriſtianity. It is the cauſe of God and it prevails. " *The world,*" ſay the Phariſees, " *are gone after him.*"

" *Hoſannah to the Son of David, Hoſannah in the higheſt.*" And now the twelve are ſent forth expreſsly to preach the goſpel, and to declare the coming of Chriſt.

But where is Paul the Apoſtle? Is not he alſo among the twelve? No, it is remarkable, that in reading through the four Evangeliſts, we do not ſo much as find any mention of his name. Surely, then, he muſt have been ignorant that Jeſus was born, and that the promiſed Savior was come. He muſt have dwelt in ſome diſtant corner of the land, in ſome village, to which the fame of Chriſt had happened not yet to reach.—No, he was of Tarſus, a neighbouring city of Galicia, and he dwelt even in Jeruſalem. But ſurely, then, Paul muſt have been ſome Heathen, who was unacquainted with the Old Teſtament Prophecies, ſome creature of Cæſar, engaged in mere affairs of ſtate, who could know nothing of the Jewiſh Meſſiah. No, he was a Jew, and even one of the Phariſees, who were the ſtricteſt ſect of the Jews; he was " *bred alſo at the feet of Gamaliel.*"—Perhaps, then, he was examining the Old Teſtament evidence, or he was obſerving the character and the actions of the Meſſiah, that he might know whether this was truly the Son of God.—But at length Chriſt is crucified, and now many additional Prophecies are fulfilled, for it was written, " *That Chriſt ſhould ſuffer.*" " *The ſoldiers alſo part his garments among them, and for his veſture they caſt lots.*" He riſes alſo from the grave, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled—" *He breaks the bonds of death aſunder, becauſe it was not poſſible for him to be holden of them.*" And now alſo we read that he ſhews himſelf to a variety of perſons; at one time, " *to Cephas, then to the twelve;*" and thenh is Re-

ſurrection is made manifeſt, for he appears "*to five hundred brethren at once.*" Does Paul come forward now, and own he is convinced? Oh, no; the Apoſtles go forth, Paul alone excepted, and the Diſciples "*go forth,*" on every ſide, and "*with great power give they witneſs of the Reſurrection of Chriſt from the dead.* Behold the Savior, having finiſhed his work, aſcending triumphantly into Heaven, while "*A cloud receives him out of their ſight.* After this event, ſurely, every one muſt believe. After this event, Peter, even Peter who had denied his Lord, waxes bold in the very preſence of his murderers; unbelieving Thomas having long before been conſtrained to cry out, "*My Lord and my God.*" Now too the flock of Chriſtians begins to gather itſelf together, and at length "*The day of Peutecoſt is fully come;*" "*Three thouſand are added to the Church on one day of ſuch as ſhall be ſaved.*" The Gift of Tongues is beſtowed, and the Apoſtles, "*having tarried at Jeruſalem for the promiſe of the ſpirit, go forth on every ſide having received power from on high, the Lord alſo confirming the word with ſigns following.*

But where, I ſay again, is Paul of Tarſus? Is he not now joined to the Apoſtles? Is he not now a convert to the cauſe of Chriſt?—No; it is remarkable, on the contrary, that the firſt time when we read of him is on the event of Stephen's being ſtoned to death, for it is ſaid of Paul on that occaſion, that "*he kept the raiment of them that ſlew him.*" Are you not now aſtoniſhed at this wicked Paul, at this Jew, this Phariſee, this Hebrew of the Hebrews, this Doctor and Teacher in Iſrael, that he ſhould be ſeen holding the clothes of thoſe who were ſtoning Stephen, for Stephen was a Preacher

of Chriſt, a Preacher of Paul's own Meſſiah.—But let us next obſerve Paul beginning to "*breathe out ſlaughter againſt the Chriſtians*, and applying to the Chief Prieſts for *authority to bind the Chriſtians and put them to death.*" It uſually happens, whenever the Goſpel is made known, that a certain time is afforded for laying open the great evidences and doctrines of it, and if theſe are neglected, and the ordinary time is paſſed, I believe it often comes to paſs, that great hardneſs of heart follows, and that the unbeliever then is not an unbeliever only, but perhaps alſo a hinderer of the Goſpel, nay, a perſecutor even, and injurious. Paul had now had the full opportunity of thus examining the truth of Chriſtianity; he had been in the way of hearing much of Chriſt, and he might, if he pleaſed, have ſatisfied himſelf of the reality of his Reſurrection; nay, he had ſeen the Martyr Stephen die in this very faith, and had himſelf "*beheld his face ſhine like that of an angel*;" but Paul had ſmothered his convictions; pride and prejudice, and many angry paſſions, conceit of his own wiſdom, truſt in his own righteouſneſs, and confidence in his own religious opinions, together with bigotry to his Sect; theſe cauſes, or cauſes like theſe, diſguiſing themſelves under the ſacred name of Religion, hurried him even into the hotteſt perſecutions, "*for he verily thought that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jeſus of Nazareth, and he perſecuted the Believers in Chriſt even unto death, binding and delivering into priſon both men and women, puniſhing them alſo in every city, and giving his voice againſt them, and being exceedingly mad againſt them, he compelled them to blaſpheme.*" And now what ſhall we ſay? Can your patience

any longer bear with this unworhy Jew? Are you not ready to grow mad yourſelves at the madneſs of this horrible perſecutor?—"*But God's ways are not as our ways, neither are his thoughts as our thoughts.*" Paul is ſtruck to the ground as he is going on one of theſe bloody errands to Damaſcus. But in what way is he ſtruck? Is it then in vengeance? Is it with a thunderbolt ſo as never to riſe again? Is he doomed never to lift up his eyes any more, except "*in hell, being in torments?*" No; the time which I am now to ſpeak of is the time when, as he thankfully expreſſes it in one of his Epiſtles, he is permitted "*to ſee Jeſus.*" "*Suddenly there appeared a light in the firmament above the brightneſs of the Sun, and a voice from heaven ſaying, Saul, Saul, why perſecuteſt thou me! And he ſaid, who art thou, Lord? And he ſaid, I am Jeſus, whom thou perſecuteſt. It is hard for thee to kick againſt the pricks. And he ſaid, Lord what ſhall I do! And the voice ſaid, ariſe, and ſtand upon thy feet, for I have appointed thee to be a choſen veſſel to go unto the People and to the Gentiles, to whom I now ſend thee, to open their eyes, and to bring them from darkneſs to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, and to give them an inheritance among them that are ſanctified through faith that is in me.*"

We know from the Scriptures what were the conſequences of this wonderful Converſion of St. Paul. He was numbered from this time among the Apoſtles of Chriſt, and though in one ſenſe he conſidered himſelf as "*the leaſt*" of them all, and as not even "*meet to be called an Apoſtle, becauſe he had perſecuted the Church of God;*" yet he tells us, nevertheleſs, that in point of apoſtolic rank and

authority, he was "*not a whit behind the chiefeſt of them;*" and he alſo "*labored more abundantly than they all,*" every where ſuffering the moſt cruel perſecution from his old friends the Jews, and every where "*preaching that faith which once he deſtroyed.*"

And now, what are we to learn from this extraordinary ſtory?—In the firſt place it appears to me, that we may gain from it a very ſtrong argument in favour of the general truth of Chriſtianity.

It is fair, I think, when any one quits his party, and goes over to the contrary ſide, to allow that he does it honeſtly, and on conviction, provided it is plain he has no reaſon to expect to gain any thing by the change. Now Paul had nothing to gain; on the contrary, he had much to loſe by becoming a Chriſtian, and it is therefore reaſonable to ſuppoſe, that he was very ſincere as to his converſion. In general, it muſt be a large bribe that muſt tempt a man to bear the reproach and mortification which follow him when he goes over from his party. But what was the bribe offered to Paul? What in the world could he gain by his converſion? Could he get by it either wealth or honor, or eaſe, or earthly ſatisfaction? No, he well knew that he was now likely rather to ſacrifice his wealth and all his worldly honor, that he was now about to bid adieu to eaſe and every earthly comfort and enjoyment, he well knew that all his beſt and deareſt friends were now about to turn againſt him, and that as he had once perſecuted others, ſo now he was about to ſuffer the moſt bitter perſecution in his turn. "*For this cauſe,*" ſays he, in one place, "*the Jews ſought to ſtone me;*" and no wonder, for who is there whom in general people are more ready to ſtone

than a deſerter from their own party. Were not all the other Apoſtles alſo at this time expoſed to a variety of ſufferings? Had not Chriſt himſelf been crucified? And had not Paul, therefore, every reaſon to expect the ſame "*great fight of afflictions*," whenever he ſhould profeſs himſelf converted into an Apoſtle. Accordingly we find him afterwards giving the following deſcription of himſelf:—"*He was ſtoned, he was beaten with rods, twice he ſuffered ſhipwreck; he was perſecuted from city to city—he was in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of his own countrymen, in perils by falſe brethren, in perils of the ſea, in perils in the city, in perils, in the wilderneſs, in wearineſs and painfulneſs, in watching often, in cold and nakedneſs.* Such was his treatment now he was become a Chriſtian; and let us juſt aſk alſo how did he bear it? "*Being defamed*," ſays he, *we entreat; being perſecuted, we ſuffer it.*" *We are accounted the very filth of the earth, and the offſcourging of all thingsto this day.*"—"*But none of theſe things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myſelf, ſo that I may finiſh my courſe with joy, and the miniſtry which I have received of the Lord Jeſus, to teſtify the Goſpel of the grace of God.*" When we conſider further how every temper of Paul's mind was alſo changed, how the Lion was turned into a Lamb, and how he, who had been once a Perſecutor, became "*gentle and affectionate among his people, even as a Nurſe cheriſheth her children;*" ſurely, it muſt be owned, that we have in Paul a ſtriking evidence both of the truth and alſo of the excellency of Chriſtianity.

But I think we may gain from the ſame ſtory of St. Paul's Converſion, a conſiderable degree of in-

ſight into ſome of the chriſtian doctrines, I mean for inſtance, that we may learn ſomething of the ſovereignty and power of God, and of his long forbearance and forgiveneſs, and of the exceeding riches of his grace in Jeſus Chriſt. It is the opinion of ſome who have never attended to the peculiar doctrines of the Goſpel, that every man is ſaved by the merit of his own works, and by uſing merely his own natural power and ſtrength, and not by an act of pardon, or by any ſpecial help or grace of the Almighty. Now how remarkably does the ſtory of Paul's Converſion fly in the face of every ſuch ſuppoſition, for what had Paul done in order either to merit, or in any degree to procure that mercy which was ſhewn him? What had he done in order to induce God to ſtop him on his way to Damaſcus? The caſe is a very ſtriking one in this view. Paul was breathing ſlaughter at the very time when the voice from Heaven ſpoke to him "*Saul, Saul, why perſecuteſt thou me!*" Theſe words imply that he was at that moment perſecuting Chriſt. God in this caſe very evidently exerted his own ſovereign power, and beſtowed freely on Paul the moſt unmerited grace, in agreement indeed with thoſe other paſſages of Scripture. "*For I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compaſſion on whom I will have compaſſion —So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that ſheweth mercy.*" In like manner, God is ſaid to have "*ſaved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpoſe and grace.*" But we obſerved alſo, that the long forbearance and forgiveneſs of God are here remarkably manifeſt: Paul was intended to ſerve as an eminent and

moſt encouraging example to the Believers of all ages in this reſpect. "*For this cauſe*," ſays he, "*I obtained mercy, that in me firſt Jeſus Chriſt might ſhew forth all long-ſuffering, for a pattern to them which ſhould hereafter believe on him to life everlaſting.*" It was by this deep ſenſe of his guilt, and by the remembrance of his own infinite obligations, that Paul was now qualified for his work. When he went about preaching to the Gentiles, if he had to encourage any poor deſpairing ſinner among them to repent, "*Unto me*," he could now ſay, "*who was once a Perſecutor and injurious—Unto me, who am leſs than the leaſt of all Saints, is this grace given, that I ſhould preach among the Gentiles the unſearchable riches of Chriſt.*" "*For this is a faithful ſaying and worthy of all acceptation, that Jeſus Chriſt came into the world to ſave ſinners, of whom I am chief.*"

But there is alſo a bad uſe which may poſſibly be made of this ſtory of Paul's Converſion. Weak men I believe have ſometimes taken occaſion from it to confirm themſelves in their errors and wicked men in their ſins. Some enthuſiaſts, for inſtance, have been diſpoſed to fancy that they alſo may be converted like Paul by a voice from Heaven, or at leaſt by ſome impreſſion that would nearly amount to the ſame thing. To ſuch perſons I reply, what then, do you imagine the caſe of Paul to be quite a common one? Paul himſelf did not ſo conſider it. He often ſtood aſtoniſhed at the ſtrangeneſs of it. I am as one, ſaid he, "*born out of due time.*" He thus compares himſelf to a perſon whoſe birth had been quite out of the common courſe, and undoubtedly both in the lateneſs and in the manner of his Converſion, his caſe is a direct exception to

that of moſt Chriſtians who were either to come after him or had gone before him. In fact, the Converſion of Paul was neither more nor leſs than a miracle, and we might as well expect all the other kind of miracles which were wrought on the bodies of men in the time of Chriſt to be repeated in our days, as expect to ſee miracles again wrought in order to the Converſion of men's ſouls.

But wicked men, I alſo remarked, may perhaps take occaſion from this ſtory to encourage themſelves in their ſins. "True, ſay they, "we cannot convert ourſelves; it belongs to God alone to convert us; and we will therefore ſit ſtill and wait, or in other words, we will continue in ſin (for waiting is ſinning in the caſe of theſe people) until God ſhall ſtop us in our mad career, as he did Paul in his way to Damaſcus. Where, ſay they, is the uſe of diligence and labor, or of reading the Scriptures, or of any of the means of grace? God can ſave us without theſe. We live in hopes that he will convert us ſome day or other as he did Paul, while we are not thinking of it; and though to be ſure we remain in the mean time in our ſins, and in the groſs neglect of the proper means of our ſalvation, yet we plead the great Apoſtle Paul for our example." You plead the Apoſtle Paul's example, do you? or rather you plead the example of Paul *before* he was an Apoſtle, and when he was yet unconverted. Well, then, if you plead his example at all, you may as well plead it to the full extent to which this plea can be carried. Now Paul not only ſinned in the common way, and neglected the proper means of his ſalvation as you do, but he did what was ſtill worſe: he was even "*a Blaſphemer of Chriſt, and a Perſecutor and injurious.*"

" Go then, I ſay, ſince you plead the example of Paul, and follow the example throughout. Go then, and blaſpheme Chriſt as he did. Go, perſecute the preſent followers of Jeſus. Go and hunt them out as he did in every city, and bind them, both men and women, and then put them to death." Oh, no; you are afraid of venturing any ſuch length in wickedneſs as this.—But remembet, my deluded Reader, that your plea, if it will warrant you in any one treſpaſs againſt God, will warrant you even in this. Remember, that whoſoever at any time encourages himſelf even in the ſmalleſt ſin, either of omiſſion or commiſſion, by unconverted Paul's example, may on the very ſame principle encourage himſelf even in the greateſt. Be afraid, therefore, to tread on this dangerous ground. Let not ſuch kind of arguments as I have ſuppoſed you to uſe, be endured even for a moment, but conſider them as the moſt complete perverſions of the Goſpel, and as ſome of the worſt temptations of the Devil.

This leads me to addreſs to you another obſervation on the ſame ſubject. God was pleaſed to convert Paul, as I apprehend, not as your argument has ſuppoſed, *becauſe* he was a ſinner, but *although* he was a ſinner. Paul's ſin did not invite God's grace, it only did not hinder it: nay, if his ſin, which was great already, had riſen to be ſomewhat greater, we are not without reaſon for ſuppoſing that the ſame mercy would not have been extended to him. " *But I obtained mercy*," ſays Paul, " *becauſe I did it ignorantly and in unbelief.*" This obſervation of Paul ſeems to imply, that if the crimes he committed had alſo been committed knowingly and wilfully, ſuch would then have been the aggrava-

tion of them, that poſſibly they would not have been pardoned.

And now, Reader, you may trace in this reſpect, perhaps, an important diſtinction between his caſe and your's. Paul ſinned ignorantly, but you are for ſinning wilfully, for ſo your very argument ſuppoſes. Paul *obtained mercy becauſe he did it in* mere *ignorance and unbelief*" you, perhaps, may *not* obtain mercy, becauſe as to the evil you do, you do it not ignorantly but with your eyes open; nay, let me add, that the very plea which you uſe of being encouraged in your ſloth or ſin, by the free grace and mercy of the Goſpel, is itſelf the greateſt aggravation of your guilt: the very excuſe you uſe renders your caſe dreadful, and who knows, whether if the ſame excuſe is perſiſted in, your caſe may not thereby be rendered deſperate!

To ſum up all in a few words, the fair account of the whole matter ſeems to be this. Paul was a great oppoſer of the Goſpel, and therefore a great ſinner. His ignorance and unbelief, which led him into this oppoſition, were undoubtedly criminal, for he might have known better if he would, nevertheleſs, they afforded ſome ſmall palliation of his guilt. God, on the whole, for the ſake of his own purpoſes, and not on account of any merit in Paul, for there is never any merit in man, was pleaſed to convert this Perſecutor by the power of his grace, and to convert him even by a miracle, for God, as it evidently appears by the ſucceeding part of Paul's hiſtory, had great ends to fulfil by means of this extraordinary convert. One of theſe ends was, that a ſtriking proof might thus be given of the truth of that new Religion which the world in general, and which the Jews eſpecially, were ſo

ill prepared to believe: and another end was, in order that a clear manifeſtation might be made of the ſovereignty and power of God, and of the exceeding riches of his grace, which nothing perhaps would ſhew forth more effectually than the Converſion of this unworthy Jew into an Apoſtle. Theſe, as has been already obſerved, ſeem to be ſome of the great points which the ſtory of Paul's Converſion is calculated to prove. It is calculated to prove (let it be carefully remembered) that God *ſometimes may*, and that he *always can*, convert even the moſt notorious ſinners, and even in the very midſt of their wickedneſs, but not that he *always*, no, nor even that he *often* will; ſtill leſs does it prove, that God will convert any one again by a miracle. God works ordinarily by means, and he himſelf has expreſsly appointed, in the caſe of Chriſtianity, what ſhall be his means. Theſe are the preaching of the Goſpel, (for which end this very Paul was ſent forth) the reading of the Scriptures, and the various other helps to ſalvation with which men, according to their ſeveral circumſtances, are favored. If we neglect theſe, I grant it is ſtill not impoſſible (as Paul' ſtory ſhews) that God may in ſome extraordinary way convert us; I inſiſt, however, that it is highly improbable that he will do ſo, and the more ſin we commit, the leſs likely ſhould we conſider our Converſion to be, juſt at we ſee that in the caſe of Paul, the addition of the ſin of wilfulneſs to his other crimes might have proved an aggravation that would have put him beyond the hope of mercy. We read of one dying thief who repented on the Croſs, and was certainly ſaved; but the Scriptures name no other inſtance of any thing

like a real and availing death-bed repentance. We are thus taught, that no dying ſinner ſhould harden his heart through deſpair, and yet that no living ſinner ſhould preſume on God's giving him grace to repent in his laſt hours. We read, in like manner, of only one Paul who was converted by means of a voice from Heaven, or while he was breathing ſlaughter againſt the Chriſtians; but, on the other hand, when the Apoſtles and Diſciples were regularly met together, and "*were all with one accord in one place*," at the time of Pentecoſt, we are told that the Numbers converted even in one day were *three thouſand*, for God was pleaſed to give his peculiar bleſſing on this firſt inſtance of the public Preaching of the Apoſtles by an extraordinary effuſion of his holy Spirit.

Whenever we apply ourſelves therefore to the ſtory of Paul's Converſion, let us bring with us an honeſt mind. We may, if we pleaſe, *wreſt this*, as well as other parts of Scripture, *to our own deſtruction*; but we may alſo draw from it, if we are ſo diſpoſed, the ſtrongeſt confirmation of our faith, and the greateſt encouragement to repent of our ſins, and to put confidence in our Savior's mercy.

1 AP 57

THE END.